

## INTERVIEW



# **INTERVIEW WITH H.E. MR PETKO DOYKOV**

## **BULGARIA-INDIA: 'OUR DIFFERENCES ARE WHAT CONNECT US'**

Ambassador of the Republic of Bulgaria to India, H.E. Mr Petko Doykov, speaks to Diplomatist Editor Martin Healey, and shares his thoughts on the relationship between the two countries. Excerpts...

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*Excellency, it is a pleasure to have you with us today. Could you briefly share with us what connects India and Bulgaria?*

The relations between Bulgaria and India have deep roots. This is what the Bulgarian national liberation movement ideologist Georgi Sava Rakovski was convinced of. In an attempt to increase the national self-confidence of the people, struggling for spiritual and political liberation, Rakovski used elements of Bulgarian history that show commonalities with Indian culture, language and folklore.

The Indian language Hindi is a descendant of the ancient language Sanskrit, which is part of the Indo-European language family. This is also the case for the Bulgarian language. Therefore our two languages have more than 30 words and grammatical forms that are of the same origin.

At first glance, we are very different but if you look closely, Bulgaria and India both have a good record in education, agriculture, IT, and other areas. A second look shows that the differences between us are exactly what connect us because as Indians discover our culture, our food, our environment and our cities, they want to know more about Bulgaria. The same applies to Bulgarians. So we can say that both countries are attractive to each other.

*Would you please elaborate on some of the outcomes of this special connection?*

We already have concrete achievements, for example in the areas of education and science. Action programs have been signed between the two governments and the biggest private university in India, AMITY, is willing to introduce a study program in Bulgarian. Further, both parties support the development of Bulgarian Studies in India and Indology in Bulgaria.

Another thing that unites us is IT – Bulgaria is one of the outsourcing centres of the Balkans. Fairly large companies like Hewlett Packard establish development centres in the country. Also, many companies, including Microsoft, Apple and Hewlett Packard choose us for service centres. We know that India is also a country that IT activities are being outsourced to.

Today, Bulgaria and India are developing a relationship of traditional friendship, comprehensive cooperation and a close dynamic partnership. They are based on shared democratic values and common goals for the building of one peaceful world of humanity, stability and prosperity. The relations have a stable character and are subject to domestic political consensus in both countries. The efforts are aimed at building a comprehensive Bulgarian-Indian partnership on a qualitatively new level, with Bulgaria as a member state of the European Union and the promotion of India as a global power, as well as in the context of the EU-India strategic partnership. Between Bulgaria and India, there is similarity and closeness of positions on a wide range of international issues and initiatives including the fight against international terrorism. Fruitful cooperation in the UN and other international organizations and forums is carried out.

A solid multifaceted legal basis and broad institutional framework for bilateral cooperation in important areas of mutual interest was created. It includes trade and economic relations, defence, science and technology, information technology, and health care. A fruitful cooperation in the fields of education, culture, youth and sports is being developed. Both countries are partners in the implementation of research projects in a number of priority areas and a Bulgarian device was part of the scientific instruments on

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board of Chandrayaan-1, India's unmanned spacecraft to the moon.

Bulgarian specialists in various fields have the opportunity to improve their skills in Indian research and educational institutions through Indian government programs, all while experiencing the rich culture and traditions of India and India's dynamic present. Indira Gandhi School in Sofia and Georgi Rakovski School in Delhi are great symbols for the Bulgarian-Indian friendship.

The development of relations and cooperation between Bulgaria and India at the government level are completed successfully by the fruitful interaction between NGOs in both countries and active people to people contacts. Particularly joyful is the existence of a growing number of people from different walks of life in Bulgaria and India, who turned the cause of the Bulgarian-Indian friendship and cooperation into their personal mission.

***Bulgaria's key interests in India seem to be trade and investment cooperation and the promotion of tourism. What are the main sectors, in which the two countries work together and what makes Bulgaria an attractive destination for Indian businesses?***

Bulgaria is interested in expanding bilateral trade and economic cooperation. So far, trade between the two countries is modest, but there are possibilities for its expansion. Bulgaria exports grain cultures, food products (confectionery), wine and spirits, essential oils (rose oil), animal feed, fertilizers and machinery for the food industry to India. The range of goods is diverse, which shows that conditions for the growth of trade are evident. Bulgaria imports Indian products of ferrous and non-ferrous metallurgy, woollen and cotton fabrics and medical drugs.

We are interested in strengthening cooperation in the field of tourism.

In recent years, successful Indian investments were implemented in Bulgaria in the field of information technology, agriculture, in the pharmaceutical industry, tourism and hospitality, and clinical trials among others. Bulgaria attracts Indian business with favourable regulatory conditions, relatively good information and transport infrastructure, highly qualified executive and managerial staff with good training in accordance with European standards, and preserved traditions in agriculture and industry.

Especially promising is the cooperation in services, in particular in high-tech services. Evidenced by the high rates of ICT [Information and Communications Technology] development in our countries, we believe that we have the necessary scientific potential for collaboration and cooperation in the fields of medicine, pharmacy, biotechnology and new materials.

***In an interview in 2015 you said that Bulgaria could be India's "Springboard to Europe". What are your thoughts on this today?***

Bulgaria enjoys many advantages as a place for doing business. Located at a strategic crossroads between the EU, the Middle East and Russia, and as a EU member state, Bulgaria can play the role of a gateway for Indian goods and investments to the European market.

Bulgaria is a politically and economically stable state. It is a member of NATO and a full member of the European Union with access to a market of 560 million consumers.

Bulgaria applies the lowest tax rates among EU member states – 10% corporate and personal income tax. Our country enjoys many advantages as a place for doing business and for investments.

We have modern legislation in the spheres of investment, entrepreneurship and tourism, directed at establishing good practices in regard to the administrative services provided to companies, and at offering support for entrepreneurial initiatives.

We have a competitive labour force in terms of reasonable costs and high qualifications. There are also highly qualified and skilled experts in our country.

That's why, today, Bulgaria could be considered a springboard for Indian companies to Europe.

***What are some of the areas, in which you would like to see more cooperation between Bulgaria and India?***

A bilateral political dialogue at the highest level needs to be reestablished because in recent years, there has been a substantial deficit in this area. We would like to resume the practice of a periodic exchange of visits at the level of Head of State and Government. Such visits give a strong impulse to the development of bilateral cooperation in all areas of mutual interest.

Efforts should be undertaken so that mechanisms for bilateral cooperation continue to operate regularly on the respective mutually agreed levels. A joint effort is also needed in terms of increasing bilateral commodity exchange and expanding economic cooperation. The current volume of bilateral trade does not correspond to the potential of the two countries.

Bulgaria is interested in attracting Indian investors and offers favourable conditions for doing business and free access to the vast EU market. We expect Indian investors to benefit more from the existing opportunities.

Bulgaria is interested in attracting Indian film producers and it offers excellent conditions for shooting movies – beautiful scenery, towns with interesting architecture, and competitive prices.

Bulgaria is also attractive to Indian tourists. We have exquisite assets that still remain unknown to the world. It

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is a little known fact that, despite its somewhat humble territory (Bulgaria spreads over a total area of just 110,994 sq. m.), the country ranks third in Europe, following Greece and Italy, in number of uncovered artefacts. True, you wouldn't stumble across the Colosseum, but you may be stunned to find a fully preserved Roman amphitheatre in the centre of Plovdiv – Europe's cultural capital for 2019. The Thracians, an ancient people that inhabited our lands, have also left us with a remarkable legacy. The magnificent bronze head of the Thracian King Seuthes III, which was one of a number of artefacts exhibited at the Louvre in Paris last year, caused quite a stir and was dubbed by experts as exquisite and as valuable as Leonardo's Gioconda. Nine of our tourist attractions are part of the UNESCO World Heritage List, including the Rila Monastery and the medieval Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ Pantocrator in the ancient Black Sea coast city of Nesebar. The world's oldest cultivated gold treasure was also uncovered in Bulgaria, in the city of Varna.

We are also one of the richest countries in the Old Continent in cold and hot mineral springs. Our country can become a foremost golf destination as well. With 8 superb golf courses, two of which have been designed by the living golf legend, the Black Knight of golf, Gary Player, we are, rightfully, starting to gain a place on the world's golf map. Bulgaria hosted a big golf tournament with India's golf royalty Shiv Kapur as our guest of honour. I'm sure that as a result of this, Indian golfers searching for new, high-class courses and quality recreation can find this in Bulgaria. And last but not least, Bulgaria has long-lasting traditions in wine production – dating back to our Thracian ancestors.

***The Bulgarian Embassy in New Delhi covers relations with not one, but six countries: Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Bhutan. How do you maintain good relations with all of these countries? It seems like an intense workload.***

The interests of Bulgaria in India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Maldives and Bhutan are immediate and durable, and are complimented by an active policy of the European Union on the close involvement of the countries of the region of South Asia on a number of topics on the international agenda, including overcoming the economic crisis, migration, the promotion of integration processes in the region and others. Bulgaria maintains and develops relations of friendship and cooperation with the countries of the region based on shared democratic values.

We are confident that there is a potential to deepen cooperation both in the sphere of bilateral relations as well as on a multilateral basis. In recent years, we developed more active dialogue with Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The first ever visit to Bulgaria by a Prime Minister of Bangladesh

took place in May 2016. The readiness declared by Bulgaria in 2012 to establish diplomatic relations with Bhutan is a testament to the will of our country to develop a friendly and fruitful friendship. Efforts are undertaken by the Bulgarian Embassy in Delhi to promote dialogue and interaction with Nepal and the Maldives.

In summary, the workload is there but it pays off.

***Could you please highlight some of the efforts that the governments of Bulgaria and India are currently undertaking to strengthen their ties in regard to cultural diplomacy?***

Bulgaria and India are making a focused effort to develop fruitful cooperation in the areas of education, science and culture, which are prerequisites for better understanding and rapprochement between the two countries. Cooperation in science, education and culture is based on the agreement on cultural relations of 1963, in accordance with which three-year programs for implementation are being signed. The last one covering the period 2015-2017 was signed in September 2015 in New Delhi.

Bulgaria participates regularly in the Days of European Culture in India. In recent years, we have successfully presented ourselves in the Week of Francophonie in India with a screening of contemporary Bulgarian films, dance programs and exhibitions. We participate in the International Film Festival of India, the "Little Europe" festival for feature films from Central Europe, and in the annual festival "The IIC Experience: A Festival of Arts".

Every year, the Indian radio broadcasts Bulgarian music for events like Bulgaria's National Day 3 March and the Day of Bulgarian Education and Culture and Slavonic Literature 24 May.

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) awards scholarships to Bulgarian graduate students, researchers and students for training in Hindi and Indian culture. And lastly, the Bulgarian Embassy in Delhi supports the celebration of the International Day of Yoga.

***Mr Ambassador, thank you for taking the time to speak to us. I wish you a happy Liberation Day tomorrow. How will you be celebrating at the Bulgarian Embassy?***

On 4 March, the Bulgarian Embassy in Delhi and the Honorary Consulate of Bulgaria in Hyderabad are co-organising a reception in the Hyderabad Golf Club to mark this event. Diplomats, politicians, businessmen, governmental officials and friends of Bulgaria are invited.

In addition, on 9 March, the Embassy and the Association of Friendship India – Bulgaria will cooperate on an event marking Bulgaria's National Day. Three Bulgarian students from the Indology Department of Sofia University will share their thoughts on the significance of this date. ■